

# Forrest Bess

October 7–December 13, 1981

Whitney Museum of American Art



Forrest Bess, 1951

Forrest Bess was a visionary painter. He derived his images from dreams and from a private symbolism based on obscure sexual references.<sup>1</sup> Bess believed the unconscious capable of apprehending the abstract patterns and movements underlying natural phenomena, and he sought to capture this "reality" in his work. Throughout his mature years he kept a notebook at his bedside in which he drew--for later translation into oil--the visions that appeared to him between waking and deep sleep. "I close my eyes and paint what I see on the insides of my eyelids," he once remarked.<sup>2</sup> To Bess, these "ideograms," as he called them, conveyed universal meanings transmitted from one generation to another through the unconscious (see *Selected Lexicon of Symbols*). He felt himself merely a conduit, claiming not to know at times what his images meant until years later. "I do not feel responsible for my work," Bess wrote in 1951. "I was only a conduit through which this thing, whatever it was, flowed. . . . I have copied [my dreams] faithfully without elaboration."<sup>3</sup>

Stimulated by his readings of Jung's theories concerning the symbolism of the unconscious, Bess developed a curiosity about his own abstract images. In Bess' study of mythology, alchemy, archaeology and religion he perceived the recurrence of many of the symbols in his own work; he became obsessed with investigating the mystery of

this universal language. Eventually he concluded that this shared symbology held the key to the alchemists' quest for eternal life. Unlike others--Jung and the alchemists, for example--who had considered these images only in spiritual terms, Bess applied a physical interpretation to them. Beginning in the early fifties he came to believe he had discovered the secret of immortality--androgeny, the conjunction of male and female, through actual physical transformation. Believing in the magic of symbols to stimulate the unconscious, Bess felt he could communicate this secret through the depiction of pertinent symbols; a vocabulary of images relating to his own interpretation of how this life-prolonging union of opposites might physically be effectuated appeared frequently throughout his work.

Bess' theory of androgeny and its attendant symbology arose from his anxieties and attitudes about his own sexuality and what he saw as dichotomous aspects of his personality--a polarization manifested in the sensitive, gentle painter on the one hand; the rugged, liquor-drinking fisherman on the other. During the fifties, he became fanatical about disseminating his theory of immortality: he advocated uniting male and female by means of a surgically produced fistula into the male urethra, which made possible urethral orgasm. Bess propounded his theory tire-



Drawings, 1957



Forrest Bess in his Bay City house, 1958

lessly both in letters and in conversation. Eventually, when it proved resistant to acceptance, he felt he had to involve himself physically; beginning in 1960 he underwent a series of operations in an attempt to prove the validity of his hypothesis.

Bess' painting career began when he was twelve and spanned more than six decades. He grew up in the oil fields of Texas, the roughneck son of an itinerant oil laborer. Inspired in part by the fantasy painting of his maternal grandmother, he became interested in art as a child. To appease his father, however, he studied architecture--considered a more masculine pursuit--while attending first Texas A & M University and then the University of Texas. He dropped out in his junior year and went to Mexico, where he remained intermittently for four years, painting in an expressionist style with thickly impastoed paint and dark colors. He returned to the United States during World War II and served in the Army Corps of Engineers, rising to the rank of captain before acknowledging that he could not reconcile the conflicting aspects of his personality--masculine and feminine--in such a world.

Following a year of painting in San Antonio, in 1947 he moved to his family's bait camp on Chinquapin Bay, on the southeastern coast of Texas. Seven years later his father died and his mother moved to nearby Bay City. Bess remained at the camp for the next twenty-seven years, making his living fishing for shrimp which he sold as bait. His house--a ramshackle barge turned upside down and covered with tar and shells for insulation--was located on a spit of land reachable only by boat on the Intracoastal Waterway. Conditions were rugged, and Bess often lacked money even for food: at times he would sell paintings for as little as ten dollars in order to buy food and supplies. The physical demands of fishing left little time to paint; consequently Bess' entire oeuvre consists of only one hundred works.

During the lean years he found solace with a few friends--in particular Harry Burkhart and his friend Jim Wilford; Mary and Earle Ludgin; and Betty Parsons. Parsons gave him a one-man show in 1949 followed by shows in 1954, 1957, 1959, 1962, and 1967. Despite her encouragement and the enthusiastic support of Meyer Schapiro, Bess' work received little notice during his lifetime except from fellow artists. After his last show with Parsons in 1967, his reputation went into virtual eclipse. He became increasingly eccentric in the early seventies, during the time when his rhinophyma, a nodular swelling of the nose, was becoming more pronounced; after a brief period in a mental hospital, he was admitted to a nursing home in Bay City. He died there on November 11, 1977, a victim of skin cancer exacerbated by long hours in the sun.

What Bess left was a body of richly poetic works unequivocally derived from his inner being. Yet despite the specificity of his iconography, the impact of Bess' paintings does not depend on deciphering his pictorial vocabulary; rather, it rests on the power of his visual images to evoke universal responses quite apart from the paintings' obscurely personal origins. Their directness and authenticity speak to the art of today. Creating an idiosyncratic symbolism which is simultaneously personal and universal, and exploiting expressive paint surfaces are pictorial achievements shared by many of today's artists. Meyer Schapiro, in his essay for Bess' retrospective exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1962, called him a "real visionary," not inspired by "texts of poetry or religion but moved by a strange significance of what he alone has seen."<sup>4</sup>

Barbara Haskell  
Curator

## Acknowledgments

Many individuals contributed to the success of this project: Sandra J. Curtis and Terrell James at the Archives of American Art, Texas Area Center; Roy Fridge; Betty Parsons; and Jack Tilton were all extremely helpful in providing information on Bess and access to primary documents. I am grateful for their assistance as I am for that of Dana Friis-Hansen, Suzanne Dickerson, and Beth O'Brien of the Whitney Museum staff. My deepest thanks are to the lenders, whose particularly high level of generosity and support was extremely gratifying.

B.H.

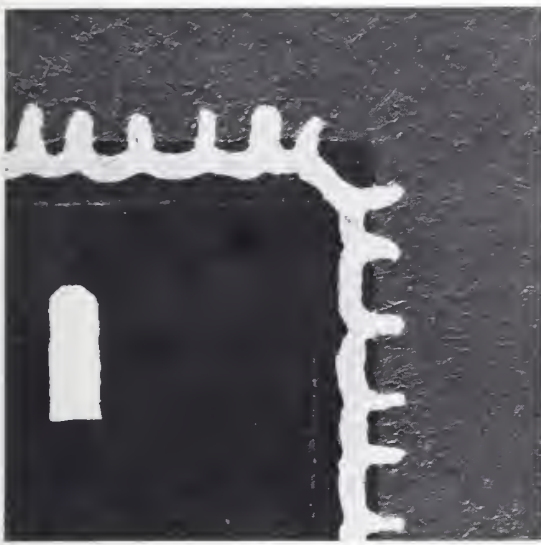
<sup>1</sup> Information on Bess from documents and correspondence in the Betty Parsons Gallery files; Forrest Bess Papers, Archives of American Art; and conversation with Roy Fridge, Houston, August 21, 1981. Additional information from conversations with Harry Burkhart and Jim Wilford, Houston, August 21, 1981; and Rosalie Berkowitz, New York, September 8, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Forrest Bess to Mary Ludgin, reported by her son Donald in a telephone conversation with the author, September 22, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Forrest Bess, letter to Betty Parsons, c. 1950, Betty Parsons Gallery files.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Forrest Bess*, exhibition brochure (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1962), unpaginated.





No. 5, 1957



No. 31, 1951

## Chronology

- 1911 Born October 5, Bay City, Texas, the first child of Arnold and Minta Bess. Spends early childhood in Clemville, Texas; travels with family to oil boomtowns throughout Texas and Oklahoma.
- 1915 On Easter morning experiences first vision: a Dutch village guarded by a lion and a tiger.
- 1918 Executes first drawings, copied from encyclopedia.
- 1924 Takes private painting lessons from a neighbor in Corsicana, Texas.
- 1929 Enters Texas A & M University in architecture department, but has great difficulty with physics, math, and engineering requirements. Becomes interested in descriptive geometry, English literature, Hinduism, and Greek mythology, as well as the works of Darwin and Freud.  
Continues to paint.
- 1931 Transfers to University of Texas; develops friendship with Professor Sam Gideon, who encourages his study of religion.  
Repeatedly reads Havelock Ellis' Psychology of Sex; learns of aborigine rituals.
- 1933 Leaves school. Works as roughneck in oil fields to earn money for first of several trips to Mexico.
- 1934 Returns from Mexico and sets up small studio in Bay City, Texas. Paints portraits, houses, and dogs in what he identifies as a Post-Impressionist manner similar to that of Vincent Van Gogh and Maurice Vlaminck.  
Begins "visionary paintings" executed directly from sketches based on his dream imagery. Works receive negative response in Bay City.
- 1936 First exhibition, in a hotel lobby in Bay City.
- 1938 One-man exhibition at the Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, Texas; included in group show at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.
- 1939 A painting included in Corcoran Gallery Biennial.
- 1941-1945 Military service with Army Corps of Engineers; develops camouflage plans, for which he receives commendation.
- 1946 While still in the Army, suffers mental breakdown; has hallucinations of "The Bug" and the "Little Puffball of Love," images which he later executes as paintings.  
Psychiatrist at Veterans Administration hospital gives him first inkling of possible significance of the colored patterns he sees before falling asleep.  
First appearance of recognizable symbols in his work.  
Transfers from Army Corps of Engineers to a job teaching painting in the Veterans Administration hospital, San Antonio--"a great relief from army life."
- 1947 Returns to Bay City. Sets up commercial fishing and bait camp on Chinquapin Bay on the Intracoastal Waterway. Makes extra money building frames, designing visual aids for the public school, and giving private painting lessons.  
Subject matter of painting drawn exclusively from visions.
- 1948 Sells early paintings for ten dollars apiece to go to New York to see Betty Parsons.

- 1949 Joins Betty Parsons Gallery; first show there in December.
- Spends fall with Rosalie and Sidney Berkowitz in Woodstock, New York, while waiting for opening of Parsons exhibition.
- Begins extensive correspondence with Betty Parsons; outlines two conflicting tendencies in his personality--the "practical-sensible-aggressive" side, and the "artistic-sensitive-introspective" one.
- 1950 Contacts Jung about his ideas on symbolism and psychology. Jung responds that Bess' ideas are not unique, but "are rediscovered every century."
- Application for Guggenheim fellowship rejected.
- 1951 One-man show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in April. In conjunction with exhibition, writes series of articles on art and architecture for the Daily Tribune in Bay City.
- Works on idea for an abstract ballet.
- Betty Parsons considers publishing Bess' letters; later rejects idea.
- One-man shows at Texas A & M Student Center, and at the Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City.
- 1952 Included in four-man show at Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma, in February.
- 1953 Completes plan for Ballet Black and White; submits it to Meyer Schapiro, who dismisses it.
- Continues correspondence with psychology and anthropology scholars about his theories.
- 1954 One-man show at Betty Parsons Gallery.
- Father dies; mother eventually moves to Bay City.
- Concludes that the hermaphrodite is the universal symbol found in Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, and Chinese art.
- 1955 Lectures at the Medical Center, Galveston, on "The Use of Symbols to Release Tensions."
- 1956 Begins collecting written data on relation between endocrinology and painting.
- 1957 One-man show at Betty Parsons Gallery.
- 1958 Compiles notebook of sketches, clippings, and quotations--drawn from alchemy, mythology, art history, iconography, psychoanalysis, Jungian mysticism, Goethe, the Bible, and personal experience --to support his thesis that the key to eternal life is the urethral orgasm of the pseudo-hermaphrodite.
- One-man exhibitions at André Emmerich Gallery, Houston; Stanford University, Palo Alto, California; included in group show at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco.



No. 11 A, 1958

- 1959 Submits notebook to Ford Foundation as project for possible research funding; also circulates it to scholars across the country for comments.
- One-man show at Betty Parsons Gallery in April.
- 1960 Undergoes first of a series of surgical operations to support his immortality thesis.
- 1961 Develops idea for a film based on vision of Dionysius as both bull and man; seeks funding for this project from several patrons.
- Hurricane Carla hits Gulf Coast; Bess loses his house and possessions, but salvages paintings.
- 1962 Retrospective at Betty Parsons Gallery in January; catalogue includes essay by Meyer Schapiro.
- One-man show at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, in April.
- Painting included in "Wit and Whimsy in 20th Century Art," organized by the American Federation of Arts, New York.
- 1963 Blaffer Foundation considers doing a monograph on his work; later abandons project.
- One-man exhibition at the New Arts Gallery, Houston, in May.



Forrest Bess' house, Bay City, Texas, before 1961







No. 8, 1957

- 1965 Dr. John Money at Johns Hopkins University becomes interested in Bess' ideas; later includes him in an article, written in conjunction with Michael DiPriest, for Journal of Sex Research, 1976.

Bess' notebook documenting his immortality thesis read by some faculty members at University of California, Los Angeles, School of Medicine, and by anthropologists at the University of Western Australia studying aborigine tribes whose rituals include pseudo-hermaphroditic alteration.

Enters what he identifies as "Phase Two" of his career--more highly defined symbolism and expansion of media to include sculpture and film.

- 1966 Work included in the "Eighth Annual Painting Invitational" sponsored by the Junior League of Longview, Texas.

- 1967 Last one-man show at Betty Parsons Gallery in May

One-man show at the Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, in October.

- 1968 Medical editor of Washington Star loses the documentary notebook Bess had been compiling since 1958.

- 1973 Meyer Schapiro assists in getting Bess a Mark Rothko Foundation grant for \$125 a month.

- 1974 Suffers mild stroke. Brother commits him to San Antonio State Hospital in May. Enters Bay Villa Nursing Home, Bay City, in September; ceases to paint.

- 1977 One-man show sponsored by Bay City Art League in March.

Dies November 11 in Bay Villa Nursing Home.

## Selected Lexicon of Symbols

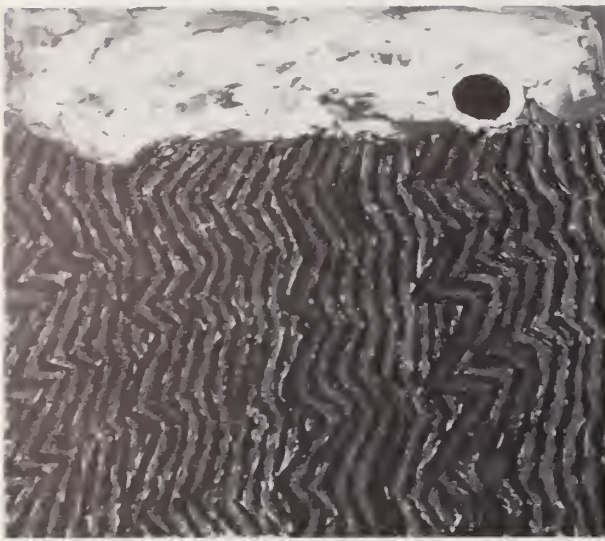
In his letters and notes, Bess drew a number of symbols which he believed underlay all artistic expression. These images appear frequently in his work and symbolize aspects of his theories regarding eternal life.

young woman			hermaphrodite	
man			death (undilated urethra)	
orifice (subincision)			life (dilated urethra)	
bulbocavernous muscle fiber			to cut	
stones (testicles)			to cut deep	
golden star (anus)			to cut shallow	
marking of time; units of time			to stretch	
to go			to stretch (formalized)	
to go and return; to go back and forth (masturbation)			hole	
craters			hole gets larger	
waves			to stretch hole	
to go north				
trees				
moisture; drops				

## Color Symbolism

red = male	pale yellow = light
white = female	Indian yellow = urine
green = young	brown or tan = excrement





Dedication to Van Gogh, 1946



No. 40, 1949

## Checklist \*

Dimensions are in inches;  
height precedes width.

Dedication to Van Gogh, 1946  
Oil on canvas, 14 x 15 3/4  
Collection of Mary and Earle  
Ludgin

Prophecy, 1946  
Oil on canvas, 6 x 7 1/2  
Private collection

Premonition, 1947  
Oil on canvas, 14 x 16  
Collection of Rosalie Berkowitz

No. 40, 1949  
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

No. 42, 1950  
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Herbert R. Molner

Untitled, 1950  
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12  
Collection of Rosalie Berkowitz

The Bridge, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 10 x 12  
Private collection

The Hermaphrodite, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 8 x 11  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

No. 5, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10  
Collection of Mrs. Robert  
M. Benjamin

No. 6, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 11 x 12  
Private collection

No. 9, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 10 x 10  
Private collection

No. 31, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Rain of Color, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 10 x 12  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Stanley Marcus

Untitled, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 9 x 10  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Drawings, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 8 x 28  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

No. 5, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 1/2  
Private collection

No. 8, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 9 x 12  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

No. 12 A, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 18  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Tab Tied to the Moon Film, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 7 1/8 x 8  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Herbert R. Molner

No. 11 A, 1958  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24  
Collection of Alan Power

No. 7, 1959  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 10  
Collection of Betty Parsons

Star of David, 1959  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 10 1/4  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Thunderbird, 1965  
Oil on canvas, 26 x 36  
Menil Foundation Collection,  
Houston

The Penetrator, 1967  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 18  
Collection of Harry Burkhart

Untitled, 1967  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Variations in Time, 1967  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 14  
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York

Hieroglyphics, n.d.  
Oil on panel, 6 x 7 3/8  
Collection of Mary and Earle  
Ludgin

Untitled, n.d.  
Oil on canvas, 14 x 16  
Collection of Harry Burkhart

Wheatfield, n.d.  
Oil on canvas, 10 x 12  
Collection of Mary and Earle  
Ludgin

\*Partial checklist

Photographs: Drawings, Dedication to Van Gogh, No. 5, No. 8 by Oliver Baker; No. 11 A, No. 31, No. 40 by Nathan Rabin.

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New York, New York 10021



